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# **Acts of omission and commission in the embodied learning of diasporic capoeira and swimming**

**Susie Scott and Neil Stephens**

## **Abstract**

This paper compares ethnographic experiences of two settings characterised by embodied learning: the African-Brazilian dance/martial-art/game capoeira, and swimming for fitness and leisure, both as practiced in the UK. We consider the ways in which participants in these scenes stage-manage the display of their learning environments, focusing on the rituals and routines of instruction and practice. Applying Scott's (2018) sociology of nothing as an analytical framework, we identify an inverse relationship between two forms of social action. In capoeira, we notice primarily acts of commission (somebodies enacting somethingness), whereas in swimming, we observe more acts of omission (nobodies enacting nothingness), although the distinction is not absolute. In both contexts, we explore the role of space, community, and the body in the negotiation of omissive and commissive socially meaningful action. This relates to Delamont's interests in capoeira, ethnography and learning physical practices outside the classroom.

## **Performative pedagogies**

Qualitative research in sports education has contributed much to our understanding of how people 'learn through doing' in social settings. The focus has been on the performative practices in which participants engage, whether within their roles as student and teachers, or as the social actors who occupy these positions. Hence, empirical studies have explored how the embodied experience of learning a physical activity shapes the diverse stories participants tell about it (Sparkes 2002), or how coaches use motivational techniques both to train athletes and to construct their own occupational identities (Adler and Adler 1978; Sage and Loy 1978).

Dramaturgical theory (Goffman 1959) has helped us to understand how learning scenes are staged by those who perform in them, as team-mates of actors cooperating to make situations flow smoothly. The classroom is a Goffmanian 'frontstage' region in which particular versions of reality are presented and routinely reproduced through members' everyday practices. The enactment of these displays involves embodied actions, through which meanings are symbolically communicated between participants.

Delamont and Atkinson (1995) argue that we should pay more attention to forms of learning that take place outside of the traditional classroom, where performative practices may assume different meanings. Responding to this call, our paper explores the social processes through which embodied learning activities are jointly negotiated in two contrasting sites. Capoeira and swimming are recreational activities in which participants train and practise relatively informally, as amateurs and hobbyists, but in pursuit of 'serious leisure identities' (Stebbins 1992). The voluntary motivation of these participants, and the dislocation of their activities from the mundane routines of work, school and home, suggests that these spaces are designated as special: they represent opportunities for escape and play in worlds that are symbolically marked as 'free areas' (Cohen and Taylor 1995). Capoeira, as taught in UK community groups, is a mode of informal learning, whereas swimming, learnt through daily life, is a mode of non-formal learning (Malcolm, Hodgkinson & Colley 2003, Keuchel 2014). Learning for leisure does, paradoxically, demand work, in the form of ritual, routine and rehearsal (Atkinson 2015), but this is experienced as enjoyable and rewarding. While this explains actors' commitment to their individual practices, it does not address the question of why and how they cooperate to stage-manage the display of their learning environments.

### **Something about nothing**

We explore this issue in relation to the binary notions of presence and absence, drawing on the theoretical framework set out by Scott (2018) in her 'sociology of

nothing'. Scott develops an interpretive understanding of negative social phenomena: symbolic objects defined by what they are not, such as no-things, no-bodies, no-wheres, non-events and non-identities. This realm represents the inverse mirror image of conventional subject matter in sociology, as the study of positively tangible social 'things' (Durkheim 1895). As Brekhus (1998) argues, researchers tend to focus on phenomena that are 'marked' as deviant, extreme or unusual, while neglecting to study the 'unmarked' background of people and processes that are empirically much more prevalent in the social world. While the sociology of everyday life has recognised the significance of the mundane, ordinary and normal (Scott 2009a), this still focuses on things and practices that are positively done. Little has been said about their negative correlates: the things we do not do, have not experienced, and the selves we do not become.

Taking a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer 1969), Scott (2018) imagines nothing as a joint social accomplishment, which emerges and is negotiated through practices of interaction. It is relationally defined: the meanings of nothing, nobody and nowhere are understood by contrast to an expected something, somebody or somewhere that is missing, and thus framed in terms of absence, lack or deficiency. Examples of this might include asexuality (the lack of sexual desire), agnosticism (the non-development of religious faith) and abstinence (the avoidance of a tempting substance). Despite their empirical non-presence, Scott argues that these negative phenomena are built, performed and recognised as meaningful, by actors and their audiences, and therefore fit Weber's (1904) criteria of social action. Nothing is produced by somebodies and from something, while in turn being productive of something or somebody else: through substitutes, alternatives and replacements, it creates new symbolic objects that would not otherwise have existed.

Scott observes two forms this social action can take, which imply greater or lesser degrees of conscious intentionality. *Acts of commission* occur when we choose or decide not to do, be or have something positive, citing motives of avoidance, refusal or rejection. Examples include not drinking alcohol, refusing to take medication, or leaving a religious cult. These acts of 'doing nothing', are performatively

demonstrated, communicating to others a defiant attitude. Alternatively, once-present objects may be lost, missed or removed against one's will, for example with bereavement or bodily decline. Individually, acts of commission can be used to work up an identity based on the somebody that one is not: negational statuses prefixed by 'never', 'ex-' or 'non-' (Ebaugh 1988, Mullaney 2006, Scott et al 2016). Collectively, meanwhile, actors tactfully pretend not to see events that are embarrassing, disruptive or threatening to interaction order (Goffman 1983), upholding the polite fiction that 'nothing unusual is happening' (Emerson 1970).

*Acts of omission* occur when we more passively neglect or fail to act, ending up in another position by default. People do not feel strongly disinclined towards one option so much as drawn towards another, which holds more meaning. Hypothetical experiences may just 'not happen to' us through external circumstances, although they may be wistfully imagined as the 'road not taken'. Examples would include career opportunities left unpursued, relationships that never blossomed, and non-involvement in political movements. This form of action can be called 'non-doing', to emphasise its lack of contrived performativity.

In the following discussion, we apply this theoretical framework to the two social scenes of diasporic capoeira and lane swimming, comparing members' embodied acts of commission and omission. We explore the parallel social processes of interaction through which 'something' or 'nothing' are created as contrasting definitions of the situation (Thomas and Thomas 1928), and 'somebodies' or 'nobodies' are instrumental. We ask what kind of normative and regulatory work this social action performs, and its functional effects on interaction order. When analysing members' activities, we focus on the routine, ordinary rituals of training, practice and rehearsal rather than the extraordinary occasions of displays and competitions. This is because we seek to understand how the informal *learning* that takes place between peers is facilitated by their attributions of scenic somethingness or nothingness.

## Methods

This paper reports a comparison of two separately conducted empirical projects. In the first project, Susie Scott (2009b, 2010) conducted a small-scale ethnography of a public swimming pool in the UK. Her data consisted of evocative descriptions and impressionistic fieldnotes describing the visual scene, conversations held and overheard with fellow swimmers, and interactions with the lifeguards, managers, receptionists and other staff. These were recorded as open-ended “mullings, questions, comments, quirky notes, and diary-type entries” (DeMunck and Sobo, 1998: 45). Taking a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer 1969, Goffman 1959), Scott focused on micro-social patterns of behaviour, such as the regulation of bodies in space, normative rules of lane etiquette, embarrassment about near-nudity and perceptions of rudeness. As an insider to the setting, Susie combined the benefits of sharing tacit background knowledge with participants (Hodkinson 2005) and biographical opportunism (Anderson 2006).

The second project is ongoing work conducted by Neil Stephens and Sara Delamont, and is a two-handed ethnography of capoeira as taught in the UK. The fieldwork was conducted in two distinct phases. Between 2003 and 2009, Sara observed Neil as he regularly trained in capoeira classes (typically twice a week, unless injured) within a single capoeira group with the same instructor. Neil and Sara would then meet outside of the capoeira class to talk through the embodied experience of diasporic capoeira and analyse the fieldnotes. In 2009 Neil ceased training due to a persistent injury. Between then and the time of writing, Sara has continued to observe capoeira classes (mostly with the same instructor, although many other teachers have been observed, some with prolonged regularity) and continues to regularly discuss the data and produce publications with Neil (see Stephens & Delamont 2006i on methods, and Delamont, Stephens and Campos (2017), Stephens and Delamont 2006ii, 2008, 2009, 2010i, 2010ii, 2013i 2013ii, and Rosario, Stephens and Delamont 2010 for reports on the findings).

The comparative analysis that produced this paper was conducted through a set of four dialogue meetings analysing both authors' embodied experiences of stage-managing each learning environment, Susie's fieldnotes on the swimming pool, and the extensive published material on Neil and Sara's capoeira work. Analysis involved identifying the appropriate comparable sites (frontstage learning sites, so routine and regular practice, but not backstage work in changing rooms, nor special events such as swimming galas or capoeira festivals (Batizados)). The data were then analysed through the theoretical framework articulated in Scott's (2018) "sociology of nothing", assessing a range of routine practices in each learning environment from this perspective, with the most revealing subset of these reported here.

## **Capoeira**

Capoeira is an African-Brazilian practice combining elements of game, dance and martial art. Its history is disputed, but roots can be traced from Angola and Nigeria, as an element of the culture of slaves taken to the America's since the 1500s (Assunacao 2005, 2007, Chvaicer 2002, Holloway 1989). In Brazil it was practiced by slaves who, so the dominant narrative goes, used it to practice fighting movements without their slave masters knowing. After the slaves were freed in 1888 it was practiced as a street sport, and then, in the 1930s, underwent another reconfiguration as it became more codified, incorporated some moves from Asian martial arts, and was taught to middle-class white men. Here we focus upon diasporic capoeira; that taught in the UK, in this case within a group taught by a Brazilian instructor called Claudio Campos (Rosario, Stephens and Delamont 2010).

As typical of diasporic capoeira across the UK, the group studied here trained during evening classes in shared sports halls and community centres for sessions lasting one to two hours. The classes typically consist of 10-30 young adults (18-35), men and women, dressed in capoeira branded tshirts and light flexible trousers called abada, often accompanied by a coloured rope, called a corda, worn as a belt around their waist to indicate their level. Playing capoeira involves two Capoeiristas exchanging

arching circular kicks and escapes (ducking under kicks or moving out of range) and occasional take-downs while maintaining a mutual response to the music being played. While there is a shared and fairly standardised set of core moves, the exchanges are not choreographed as each player responds to the movements of the other. The exchanges can be playful, occasionally more aggressive, and emphasise the style and beauty of the moves of both players together.

The classes in which these moves are learnt follow a typical format. They begin with a 10-15 minute warm up led by an instructor combining cardiovascular exercise and stretching. This is followed by a set of training exercises, routines, and rehearsals lasting over an hour, that usually begin with moves drilled with students in lines facing the front all performing the same moves to the instructor's count. Following this there will typically be a period of partner work in which the students form pairs facing each other and learn and practice routines as directed by the instructor. This part of the class may alternate between line work and partner work, and could also be interspersed with exercises for strength (e.g. press ups) or balance (e.g. handstands). This section may be accompanied by recorded or sometimes live music. Once this extended period has finished the class may take a short break before commencing the final formal section of the class, a 'roda', in which students form a circle headed by the 'bateria'; which could be one to six people playing the rhythms of capoeira live on instruments including pandeiro (tambourine), atabque (drum), and always both symbolically and physically most central, a berimbau, a tall bow shaped instrument of African origin. Students clap and sing to accompany the bateria as pairs of students enter the centre of the roda to play capoeira together. In what follows we provide more detail on first the line and partner exercises, and second the roda, to demonstrate how capoeira classes enact 'somebodies', and 'somethings'.

#### *Somebodies in capoeira training drills*



Acts of commission are performed in capoeira classes to generate group identity, rendering bodies meaningful through collective social practice. Individuals perform moves not in isolation but as partial contributions to a greater picture: the movement of the whole class as a unified body. This serves as a symbolic display of the group's shared understandings and a celebration of their collective identity. As a set of regularly rehearsed interaction rituals, this practice builds up an emotional energy (Collins 2005) that is sustained throughout the session, reinforcing members' commitment to their common beliefs and values (Durkheim 1912).

The longest part of the class – the explicitly taught component – involves bodies in action. After the warm up has completed, the entire group, regardless of ability, is instructed to commence the basic structuring move of capoeira – the *ginga* – a rhythmical move in which capoeiristas alternate which leg supports their balance to the back as they sway their centre of gravity slightly from side to side, while largely staying on the same spot, with their arms adopting the opposite position to their leg (left leg back, right arm back, and vice versa). This act of commission produces an all-encompassing collectivity as all students, and frequently Claudio, *ginga* in unison, all facing forward, and all looking to perform the move with style and grace. As the class *ginga*, Claudio will state and demonstrate kicks, escapes, or more acrobatic movements for the class to perform together on the count, although sometimes more advanced students will be given more elaborate moves to perform, but still to the same rhythm.

Throughout this rehearsal, students are taught to face forward, always keeping an eye on the imagined capoeirista they are playing with. There is an intense sense of shared bodily awareness in these moments, in what Goffman (1971) describes as navigating body vehicles, that render the individual and their class meaningful and ever-present. The ongoing simultaneous *ginga* supplemented with kicks, cartwheels, and escape moves, conducted by 10-30 people of varying skill levels in an often confined space necessitates an awareness of both the students own attention to their practice and attention to who is where at any moment to prevent potential accidents as students may drift too close to each other while executing fast kicking

movements or difficult balances. Every body is simultaneously a companion in learning capoeira, a metronomic being to which all must be co-aligned, and a potential obstacle to be negotiated and avoided.

The class will typically then do some partner work, in which students pair up and practice moves directed by Claudio, who stresses the need for style, while also demonstrating what style looks like through his or her own performance. Students work to recreate these combinations in pairs spread across the training space, while trying to avoid accidentally crashing into other pairs practicing nearby. Instructor's frequently characterise playing capoeira as a conversation, in which players respond to the movement of the other, both to avoid an attack, and respond to the humour, aggression, or deviousness of their play. There is an intense relationality in these acts of commission that recognise and interact with other bodies, as students seek to perform high quality capoeira moves both with and against their partner. To do so, the partners must always look at each other, even when spinning, facing the other way, or upside-down, so as to be prepared should their partner deliver an attack. In doing, every body is made meaningful and important, be it to create beauty, or to prevent accidents. It is the commission of a collective group body, prepared for spectacular display.

### *Somethingness in capoeira rodas*

The closing stage of each capoeira class is the roda, the circle of students singing and clapping to the rhythm of the bateria as one pair of students at a time play the game for all to see. The focus shifts from rehearsal to display, with a performative ritual enacted by members to each other. The aim is to create a visual spectacle that proudly presents and celebrates the success of the group, in terms of its social solidarity as much as its technical skill. This is the high point of the proceedings, marking a culmination of the high level of emotional energy that has been building up over the session. The acts of commission performed here function to work up an

atmosphere of happiness, pleasure and jubilant celebration: collectively, members convey that something extraordinary is happening.

Led by the teachings of their instructor, all capoeira students know that a good roda requires good axé. Pronounced Ah-shey, axé is described by students as a positive energy across the roda that makes the capoeira better, allows players to move faster and jump higher, and have a greater group spirit (Stephens and Delamont 2013ii). Producing axé is an ongoing and collective effort, choreographed by the instructor, but with responsibility shared across the group in communal acts of commission to work up the atmosphere. First, good axé requires good music. Each instructor has a repertoire of songs that they teach their students. Each uses a call and response format, with lead singer (typically the person also playing the lead berimbau) delivering verses and then a chorus line that all others either repeat back in unison or deliver the appropriate follow on line. To create axé, everyone must sing loudly and enthusiastically, and clap in time. Once the instructor is happy the axé is building, they invite the first pair into the centre of the roda to play capoeira.

Axé can also be accumulative. Over the course of the ten to thirty minutes of the roda the berimbau slowly speeds up, and perhaps changes to one of the rhythms that indicate a faster or more acrobatic style of game. This increases the speed and danger of the capoeira play, enabling the delivery of more acrobatic movements such as backflips and somersaults that require higher momentum. As the game speeds up, Claudio often instructs the students in the roda to shift from sitting to standing up, to further increase the intensity. Games become shorter as new players replace the existing duo more swiftly, allowing each player to expend their energy in less time and leading to a more frantic and exciting game style. In the final moment of the roda the players switch to a game without distinct escapes in which players exchange kicks as quickly as possible, using the launch of their next kick to escape the previous in a continuous flow of swinging legs. The singing increases in intensity, with Claudio choosing exactly when to finish the roda to a group cheer and applause. As such, the roda is a collective performance of ever increasing spectacle and somethingness.

Just as good axé is the essence of good capoeira, so is the absence of axé a recognisable threat. A lack or drop in energy causes a break in the ceremonial order of the roda; this initiates one or more of a set of strategies to raise the axé once more. The loss of axé is almost always an act of omission. No one is intentionally seeking to disrupt the scenic atmosphere, but instead it is an unintended and passive act that allows the energy to drop.

Participants respond to these acts of omission with acts of commission, which aim to repair and restore the ceremonial order and work up the atmosphere. Claudio may visibly tap the side of the berimbau to the clapping rhythm in a visual display to remind the students to clap with more enthusiasm. He may change the song, perhaps to one that is more familiar to the group or has less complicated Portuguese phrases. A stronger corrective strategy is to run loops within the circle of the roda, passing each student and singing more loudly, or clapping more furiously, to demonstrate both what is required and signal dissatisfaction with the contribution of the group. Should this fail to raise sufficient axé, Claudio may stop the roda, to tell the students how important axé is, or to complain directly about their efforts and demand more. At this point Claudio frequently reiterates the link between good axé and good capoeira, and sometimes stresses the importance for the group, and for the play of your fellow students, that axé remains high.

Occasionally Claudio will also criticise the spatial arrangement of the students, noting if the circle of the roda has reshaped as a square or an oval, or if the students are no longer equidistantly spaced and allowing gaps to open up within the roda through which, Claudio explains, the axé can escape. These acts of omission, of drifting too close to the student on one side and too far away from the student on the other, again result in restorative acts of commission. Claudio may reorganise the group to keep equal spacing, and insist everyone in the roda retains their focus on what is happening within the roda, looking to the centre of the circle, and not letting their gaze drift outside of the somethingness unfolding before them. In doing, the collective responsibility for maintaining axé is rendered clear.

Maintaining axé, and the good Capoeira that comes with it, is an operation in enacting somethingness, omitting the lull of relative nothingness, and sometimes drowning out the somethingness of other activities, be that the sound of five-a-side football across the sports hall or the allure of attention grabbing interactions outside the roda. It is collective, embodied, and symbolically communicates shared meanings between participants.

## **Swimming**

Recreational lane swimming encompasses different forms of learning, from playful sociability, through regularly scheduled exercise, to semi-professional fitness training. Like many other sporting activities, this combines physical and social aspects of experience, as participants learn by doing things together, either in groups or in parallel proximity. While swimming can be a solitary activity, individuals must come to the pool, where they encounter other patrons. However, this creates an embarrassing social predicament: swimming requires the body to be minimally clothed and in a vulnerable state of near-nakedness, while exposed to public view. There is an obvious potential interpretation of this situation as sexual, which must be bracketed out from the participants' awareness, insofar as those alternative meanings would threaten the civilised appearance of the scene. Similar observations have been made of nudist camps (Weinberg 1965) and gynaecological examinations (Emerson 1970), in which actors tacitly collude to uphold a definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas 1928) as non-sexually 'decent' (Weinberg, *ibid.*). In the swimming pool, this is accomplished by the denial and reconstitution of symbolic objects in the scene: the threatened conspicuousness of present 'some-bodies' shifts to the innocuous ignoring of absent 'no-bodies'.

## *Making nothing happen*

The social actors of the pool – swimmers, lifeguards, other staff and visitors – work to build up and sustain this definition of the situation through their ritualised routines and practices. They learn socially, as well as physically, how to perform their respective roles and to coordinate them through dramaturgical ‘teamwork’ (Goffman 1959). This puts an interpretive ‘frame’ around the scene, which serves as a pragmatic blueprint for guiding social action (Goffman 1974).

What is significant here, however, is that the participants are not so much working *up* a positive set of meanings (decency, innocence, health, leisure) as working *down* another, negative array (sexuality, eroticism, predatory gazing, power, vulnerability). Most of the interactional moves – gestures, talk, demeanour - that can be observed between swimmers are aimed towards communicating an attitude of harmlessness and fostering an atmosphere of calmness. Reassuring messages are conveyed: that people are *not* looking at each others’ bodies inappropriately, the sexualised possible reading of the situation does *not* exist, there is *nothing* remarkable to see, and overall, ‘nothing unusual is happening’ (Emerson 1970). As Goffman (1971) argued, interaction order is maintained by such displays of casual nonchalance, or ‘acting natural’, which demonstrate the scene’s adherence to ‘normal appearances’. Whatever deep threats lurk beneath the water, the show must go on.

This involves acts of commission, whereby participants consciously intend *not to see* the naked body, as ‘something’ unwanted. The alternative view of the situation is denied, disavowed or tactfully ignored by actors who reject its connotative meanings. Actors engage in this not-seeing for the sake of themselves, each other and the wider interests of interaction order, wanting to defend the dignity of all three. In dramaturgical terms, this involves techniques of defensive, protective and collective facework (Goffman 1967, Rossing and Scott 2014), respectively. Collective facework - saving the appearance of the whole group’s situation - rests upon a shared understanding that this is an unmarked and unremarkable setting. It is nowhere in particular, in which *nothing* is happening - and *something* definitely isn’t.

The commissive acts that actors perform to this end can be understood as ‘little dramatic reductions’ (Flower 2016). In contrast to conventional ‘little dramatic productions’ (Goffman 1959), which emphasise or exaggerate identity performances, these gestures function more subtly to avert an unwanted impression. Actors mute, de-emphasise, downplay or attenuate the effects of ambiguous meanings, and close down potentially disruptive interpretations. Thus the swimming pool is collectively presented as a calm, quiet scene, in which people are going about ordinary business. They are pursuing mundane, functional routines of bodily maintenance, without giving a thought to each other or alternative definitional possibilities. For example, lane swimmers rarely talk or even make eye contact, gesturing instead that they are ‘away’ in a daydreaming reverie (Goffman 1963). Lifeguards, too, gaze out over the middle distance of the pool, surveying the general scene rather than seeing individual swimmers’ bodies. In the changing rooms, conversation is usually limited to talk about the activity, such as the success or failure of one’s training regime. Swimmers use costumes and props (swimsuits, hats, goggles, floats) to suggest not only the practical tasks of their role, but also the symbolic meaning of the body as non-sexual. This is what Goffman (1959) called the ‘personal front’ of appearance and manner, which conveys the actor’s motivational intentions and respectful regard for their audience.

However, this contrived presentation of nothingness may conflict with actors’ private sentiments. Although they pretend to be distracted and oblivious to the elephant in the room, they are in fact highly attuned to its lurking, conspicuous absence. The two interpretive frames co-exist in uneasy juxtaposition, and actors are aware of their responsibility for managing this discomfort. Goffman (1959) uses the term ‘dramaturgical discipline’ to describe this capacity for shrewd, cautious monitoring of the scene, and actors’ readiness to respond to unexpected events as they arise. Hence any moments of excitement or drama that jolt swimmers out of their feigned reverie are quickly addressed and repaired, so as to gloss over potential embarrassment and restore interaction order. For example, a person swimming in the wrong direction around the lane is immediately noticed and policed by gentle

frowns; particularly affronted lane-mates may politely admonish the culprit, who will automatically apologise.

### *Apprehending nobodies*

The de-sexualisation of encounters between swimmers (Scott 2009b) is ritually re-enacted through their (non-)apprehension of each others' near-naked bodies. Actors are careful to convey that, if they acknowledge their corporeal co-presence at all, they will define it in non-sexual terms. The swimmer's body is regarded in objective rather than subjective terms, as a rather mechanical instrument whose purpose is the rational pursuit of a non-sexual goal, namely fitness or leisure (Scott 2010). It is dualistically separated from the mind, as something on which the self works. Overall, the desexualisation of embodiment creates a new, negative symbolic object: the absent, unremarkable 'no-body'.

This implies more acts of commission, which swimmers practice both in and out of the water. In the linear formation of lane-lapping, unspoken rules govern the spatial distribution of body-vehicles (Goffman 1971) and the regulation of territorial distance between them (Scott 2009b). There is a taboo on bodily contact, for example when turning at the end of a lane, and any accidental brushes of flesh elicit instinctive, immediate apologies. In the changing rooms, where the body transitions back from a physical into a social object (Scott 2010), swimmers awkwardly avoid eye contact with each other and scuttle quickly between the pool, lockers and cubicles. In the showers, people make a show of being self-absorbed in their own washing rituals and not looking at other people's bodies. These auto-involvements (Goffman 1963) include vigorous, prolonged soaping and shampooing, goggle rinsing and towel wrapping

Apart from the swimmer protagonists, the pool setting also features some other key actors whose presence remains unrecognised. These no-bodies represent discrepant roles (Goffman 1959), which are positioned outside of the main actor-audience encounter but which are important to running the scene. Their non-presence



reflects acts of omission rather than commission, as other participants do not consciously disattend to them so much as neglect to see them, because their focus is directed elsewhere. Rather than being deliberately ignored they are unseen, or seen only in limited form, as crudely painted silhouettes.

These invisible figures may hover in the frontstage region, playing supporting parts. Lifeguards, for example, assume a largely symbolic role as representatives of abstract values like safety, protecting the reputational image of the institutional setting. They are ready and prepared to leap into action in an emergency, but in the ordinary, regular routines of everyday pool life, they stand aside. As noted above, it is fellow swimmers who take care of the normal business of behaviour regulation, while lifeguards prowl the pool perimeters, gazing out into the middle distance.

Alternatively, no-bodies may stand on the margins or hide in the wings. Like the archetypal stranger (Simmel 1908), their position as detached observers affords the privilege of omniscient authority. Supervisors and managers direct the scene from such a position of elevated status, organising the institutional setting in ways that can shape or constrain other members' action: for example the schedule of timetabled swim sessions, cost of membership or staff employment conditions.

A final category of no-body is the non-person (Goffman 1959), who performs invisible labour to support the main actors but is themselves rendered socially absent. They occupy niches that are out of sight, either completely backstage or in bounded spaces away from the central arena. This category includes service personnel, such as receptionists, cleaners, accountants and website administrators, whose mundane, unglamorous 'dirty work' (Hughes 1962) is vital to the pool's smooth operation. By keeping the institution ticking over through regular, predictable routines, non-persons enable the scenic display of nothingness, as a realm of unmarked normal appearances. Seeing no-bodies of this kind contributes to the wider work of doing nothing in this scene.

## Discussion

We have compared the ways in which participants in two 'serious leisure' activities work cooperatively, not only to develop their technical skills but also to reinforce their commitment to shared values. This is achieved through the performative display and stage management of their learning environments, which can be understood as collective social practice, or dramaturgical teamwork. Ostensibly, the two scenes appear different: one is marked as a colourful, visual spectacle, celebrating extraordinary somethingness, while the other attempts to remain unmarked, through a calm reassurance that nothing untoward is happening. However, the end result in both settings is the same: a negotiated order (Strauss 1978) based on local rule-following, which allows the action to unfold smoothly. Moreover, we suggest that parallel processes operate to achieve this ends, through the enactment of acts of commission and omission in relation to three main themes.

Firstly, the distribution of physical bodies in space is collectively negotiated, through the careful monitoring of proximity, distance and territoriality. Participants steer paths for their 'body vehicles' (Goffman 1971), navigating around each other as tools or obstacles. In swimming, this involves individuals denying their proximal co-presence, creating the illusion that 'nobody' else is around. Civil inattention (Goffman 1963) to other bodies is performed through acts of commission, including avoiding eye contact, keeping distance and maximising personal space. Meanwhile in capoeira, participants use their bodies relationally to recognise and appreciate the group's unity. They organise themselves into structural forms through the various sections of the class (line work, partner work, the roda), and while pragmatically retaining sufficient distance between bodies to prevent accidents, they also pay continued, explicit attentiveness to their physical proximity. Acts of commission performed to this end include playing the conversational game of capoeira with partners, watching and responding to training demonstrations, incorporating *axé* into the roda and maintaining its shape to prevent *axé* from escaping.

Secondly, both settings rely on an appropriate type and level of social atmosphere, which is carefully monitored and maintained. In capoeira, this requires *working up* a collective mood. Participants strive to generate high levels of emotional energy to express and reinforce their commitment to shared group identity. They performatively display these positive meanings to each other through rituals that create a vivid visual spectacle, celebrating the extraordinary somethingness of the scene. Acts of commission here include practising the ginga in unison, iteratively building up energy, tempo, volume and speed, and visually enacting 'remarkable' ideals such as beauty, style, talent and spectacle. In swimming, the opposite happens through the *working down* of group atmosphere, especially with respect to the bracketing out of potentially embarrassing sexual interpretations of the scene. Participants strive to maintain the polite fiction that nothing unusual is happening by denying the proximity of their near-naked bodies and presenting the calm air of normal appearances. This involves acts of commission, such as tactful blindness and feigned ignorance (deliberate not seeing), using costume and props to redefine the body in functional, mechanical terms, and avoiding social talk. It also involves acts of omission, as swimmers neglect to pay attention to other people in discrepant roles, whose work helps to maintain the pool's institutional orderliness.

Thirdly, we see participants' readiness to respond to deviance from these norms and repair interaction order. In swimming, this occurs when someone punctures the bubble of feigned solipsism and points out the elephant in the room, by encroaching upon personal space, making accidental physical contact or alluding to the sexual connotations of each other's bodies. These deviations are corrected by acts of commission to gloss over potential embarrassment and prevent interactional strain: frowning and subtle facial expressions, not replying to flirtatious talk, moving the body to change lanes or increase territorial space, and the reciprocal apology ritual. In capoeira, this repair work seeks to undo acts of omission that have undermined *axé*, that is, the unintentional loss or escape of emotional energy, or its failure to develop. The reparative practices are themselves acts of commission, which correct this imbalance by restoring appropriate levels of *axé*: the instructor reshapes the

roda, gives displays of enthusiastic clapping, or stops the class to demand greater student contribution.

The parallel, inverted processes outlined here support Scott's argument about the reciprocal, relational constitution of something and nothing. In each setting, one of these definitions of the situation is constructed, performed and maintained, but this is premised on a tacit recognition of the other. For capoeira to work as a learning environment, 'some bodies' must create the visual spectacle of 'something' extraordinary happening, but this relies on their preventing nothing or anything less. Conversely, for the swimming pool to maintain its appearance as a decent, desexualised scene, 'no-bodies' must cooperate to stage the illusion of their mutual non-existence, and the display of 'nothing' as unremarkable ordinariness. However, this depends on the bracketing out of potential somethingness as an alternative, threatening subtext.

Qualitative researchers may take from this discussion some 'lessons' about their own methodological work. As noted above, following Brekhus, there is a tendency for social research to gravitate towards the marked extremes of deviant behaviour, by studying positive somethingness. This epistemological bias could be corrected by paying greater attention to the surrounding, unmarked nothingness on which such phenomena are predicated. Equally, perhaps, researchers studying the mundane, ordinary or negative in social life should recognise how the meaning of these terms is constructed by relational contrast to 'something' else. Finally, when analysing and writing up ethnographic studies of either kind, researchers might be critically reflexive about how their own perceptual lenses shape their interpretations of the scene. The events they choose to observe, document and report as the findings – 'something' worth remarking upon – represent just one narrative version; it is mirrored by an infinite array of non-events, left unmarked in the shadows. The relative and mutually constitutive meaning of the terms 'something' and 'nothing' is highlighted by comparative analysis and dialogue between researchers, as we have demonstrated in this piece.

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